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Was Jesus a Patriot?

By KIRBY PAGE

KEEP IN MIND the fact that Jesus was a citizen of a country that was in bondage to a militaristic power. Rome was the mistress of almost all the known world. Roman officials had full power over the entire life of the Jewish people. True enough, a good deal of local autonomy had been granted to the Jewish sanhedrin, but even this delegated power could be withdrawn at any moment at the will of the conqueror. The Roman procurator had power to appoint the high priest, and Valerius Gratus exercised this right to the extent of changing the high priest four times within four years. Roman centurions commanded the armed forces that kept the Roman officials in power. Tax collectors gathered tribute for the upkeep of the imperial city and its officials. In every corner of the nation evidences of the presence of the conqueror were painfully evident.

The second fact which should not be overlooked is that Jesus was a member of a race that loved freedom and hated tyranny to an extent that has rarely been equalled by any people in human history. Everywhere the rank and file were awaiting the coming of the Messiah who should lead them in the struggle to overthrow the tyrant and restore their glorious freedom. They were not all agreed as to the nature of the Messiah who was to come, but the predominant conception was that he would be the son of David. Dean Shailer Mathews tells us that this phrase "had become expressive of the entire messianic ideal as held by all Jews, whether scribes or common people. It indicated that the new kingdom was to be essentially Jewish, just as its king was to be representative of the most typical royal family of Hebrew history. More than that, it declared the new kingdom to be essentially military, for to the Jew, David was essentially a man of war, a conqueror of the enemies of Israel. To describe the messianic king as his son was to ascribe to him the same military powers."

The third fact which needs to be remembered is the never-ending series of revolts and rebellions which kept breaking out. About 150 B. C. the Maccabees had led the Jewish people in a revolt which was successful and which for a brief time re-established national freedom and greatness. But soon they were in bondage again. About the time of the birth of Jesus, occurred a very violent rebellion against Rome. When a large Roman eagle, made out of gold at vast public expense, was erected over the principal gate of the temple, certain young men under the leadership of Matthias and Judas pulled down the eagle and cut it into pieces. At the command of Herod they were burned alive. When Archelaus succeeded Herod, the populace demanded that the officials who had executed this sentence should themselves be punished. This demand was rejected. When the people refused to disperse, Archelaus called out the Roman troops and three thousand Jews were slaughtered. On another occasion Theudas led a revolt with the result that he and four hundred of his followers were slain. In the year A. D. 7 Judas of Galilee led an armed revolt. He and his followers were likewise slaughtered. During the reign of Pilate an armed rebellion was put down with great loss of life. In A. D. 70 the city of Jerusalem was destroyed and over a million people were slain, crucified or sold into slavery. Thus we see there was never a period when the Jews ceased their efforts to regain their freedom. In this connection, Professor V. G. Simkhovitch says: "The rebellion of the Jews against Rome rather begins with the power of Rome over the Jews; and in the same degree as the Roman power over the Jews increased, did political reaction against that power, the revolution against Rome, increase and spread."

With these historic facts in mind the writer has recently gone through the New Testament record and has discovered at least twenty-three passages that seem to throw light upon the question under consideration. Let us briefly note these passages.

NEW TESTAMENT EVIDENCE

1. Jesus was born at the time when Joseph and Mary had gone to Bethlehem for enrolment. It was on a basis of this census that Roman taxes were apportioned. "Now it came to pass in those days, there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled . . . and Joseph also went up from Galilee . . . to enrol himself with Mary." (Luke 2:1-5). 2. The story of the slaying of the children of Beth-

lehem by Herod assumes new significance as the historic background is kept in mind. (Matt 2:16). Why was Herod so eager to kill the young child Jesus? In a land of chronic rebellion would any ruler fail to be troubled over the prophecy by the wise men that this child was to be king of the Jews? 3. In Luke we find the following record: "Now there were some present at that very season which told him of the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices." (Luke 13:1). Who were these people who had been slain by command of the Roman ruler? Is it not obvious that they were revolutionists? 4. In the Acts of the Apostles we find the record of two rebellions, led respectively by Theudas and Judas. (Acts 5:36,37). When, in accordance with the custom at the feast, Pilate offered to release one prisoner, the populace chose Barabbas instead of Jesus. Why? Who was Barabbas? Luke refers to him as "one who for a certain insurrection made in the city, and for murder, was cast into prison." (Luke 23:19). That is to say he was a leader in an attempted revolt against Rome. It is clear, therefore, that the people were clamoring for the release of a national hero 6. Numbered among the twelve disciples of Jesus was Simon the zealot. (Luke 6:15). Who were the zealots? They were a group who were advocates of armed rebellion against Rome. 7. Evidence that Jesus was an acute observer of the signs of the times is found in his prophecies concerning the destruction of the temple. "And Jesus said unto him, Seest thou these great buildings? There shall not be left here one stone upon another, which shall not be thrown down . . . But when ye see the abomination of desolation standing where he ought not (let him that readeth understand), then let them that are in Judaea flee unto the mountains." (Mark 13:2,14). The parallel passage in Luke read: "But when ye see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that her desolation is at hand. Then let them that are in Judaea flee unto the mountains." (Luke 21:20,21). Is it not clear that Jesus is referring to the desecration and destruction of the temple by Roman soldiers? 8. Concerning another incident the record reads: "And when he drew nigh, he saw the city and wept over it, saying, If thou hadst known in this thy day, even thou, the things which belong unto peace! But now they are hid from thine eyes. For the days shall come upon thee, when thine enemies shall cast up a bank about thee, and compass thee round, and keep thee in on every side, and shall dash thee to the ground, and thy children within thee; and they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another; because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation." (Luke 19:41-44).

9. The Pharisees, who were constantly seeking to entrap Jesus, once asked him: "Is it lawful for us to give tribute unto Caesar, or not?" (Luke 20:22). What was the significance of this question? If he answered no, he would be liable to arrest for treasonable utterance; whereas if he replied yes, he would alienate the Jewish populace. Jesus "perceived their craftiness" and did not give them a direct answer. 10. In the new Testament publicans, tax-collectors, are frequently referred to in the same terms as outcasts and sinners. For example: "Why do ye eat and drink with the publicans and sinners?" (Luke 5:30). The reason is the obvious one that the tax-collectors were agents of hated Rome and therefore objects of scorn and indignation in the eyes of all patriotic Jews. 11. "Then certain of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, Master, we would see a sign from thee." (Matt. 12:38). What was the significance of this request, which was repeated on several occasions? The answer is to be found in a study of the messianic prophecies, where it is recorded that the Messiah would validate his claim to this position by performing a marvellous miracle or sign. 12. On several occasions Jesus is referred to as son of David. For example: "And the most part of the multitude spread their garments in the way; and others cut branches from the trees, and spread them in the way. And the multitude that went before him, and that followed cried, saying, Hosanna to the son of David." (Matt 21:8,9). This passage is illumined by the historic fact of the messianic hope of deliverance at the hand of a descendant of the great king. Is it not clear that the populace expected Jesus to set up an earthly kingdom? 13. This fact is made even more evident in another passage: "When therefore the people saw the sign which he did, they said, This is of a truth the prophet that cometh into the world. Jesus therefore perceiving that they were about to come and take him by force, to make him king, withdrew again into the mountain himself alone." (John 6:14, 15). 14. Even the disciples expected Jesus to be king, as is revealed in the following verses: "And there came near unto him James and John, the sons of Zebedee, saying unto him . . . Grant unto us that we may sit one on thy right hand, and one on thy left hand, in thy glory." (Mark 10:35-37). 15. That Jesus did not accept the current messianic conception is revealed in the following passage: "Ye know that the rules of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Not so shall it be among you: but whosoever would become great among you shall be your servant." (Matt. 20:25-26).

16. The Jewish leaders were afraid that Jesus would stir up an unsuccessful revolution, as is indicated in the following verses: "The chief priests therefore and the Pharisees gathered a council, and said, What do we? for this man doeth many signs. If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him: and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." (John 11:47-48). That is to say, they were afraid of losing the measure of local religious autonomy which they enjoyed. 17. Another passage read: "Some therefore of them of Jerusalem said, Is not this he whom they seek to kill? . . . But of the multitude many believed on him; and they said, When the Christ shall come, will he do more signs than those which this man hath done?" (John 7:25,31). The Pharisees heard the multitude murmuring these things concerning him; and the chief priests and the Pharisees sent officers to take him. 18. The Pharisees also sought to get rid of Jesus by warning him of Herod's antagonism: "In that very hour there came certain Pharisees, saying to him, Get thee out, and go hence: for Herod would fain kill thee." (Luke 13:31). 19. The charge against Jesus before Pilate was that of sedition: "And they began to accuse him, saying, We found this man perverting our nation, and forbidding to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ a king. And Pilate asked him, saying Art thou the king of the Jews?" (Luke 23:2,3). It is worthy of notice that the charge against Jesus before the Jewish authorities was a very different one, that of blasphemy. 20. When Pilate would have released Jesus, the populace restrained him by reminding him that he might incur the displeasure of his imperial master: "Upon this Pilate sought to release him, but the Jews cried out, saying, If thou release this man thou art not Caesar's friend; every one that maketh himself a king speaketh against Caesar." (John 19:12). 21. In order to humiliate the patriotic Jews, Pilate had a superscription placed above the cross on which Jesus was crucified: "The King of the Jews." (Mark 15:26).

22. Even after the resurrection of Jesus his disciples were still expecting him to bring national deliverance and freedom: "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore the kingdom of Israel?" (Acts 1:6). 23. In the light of the existing historic situation and of the above passages, let us look again into the significance of the temptations of Jesus. (Matt. 4:1-11). Is it not obvious that here we have an autobiographical account of the inner struggle of Jesus concerning the nature of the kingdom which he came to establish, and the ways and means of achieving the desired end? With evidence of

the tyranny of the conqueror everywhere visible, with his countrymen passionately longing for freedom and eagerly awaiting the military messianic deliverer, with the memory of the glorious victories achieved under the Maccabees in every mind, with the readiness of the populace to respond to the call of any able revolutionist, and with Jesus' own conviction of his messiahship—in the light of all these facts, surely there can be no doubt that the major decision of Jesus' life had to do with the nature of his kingdom and the method of bringing it to pass. In this connection, Professor Simkhovitch says: "At the given time there was but one problem for the Jews—a single, all-absorbing national problem, that became under the circumstances the religious problem as well. It was the problem of existence, the problem of escape from certain annihilation."

JESUS' IDEA OF HIS KINGDOM

That Jesus turned away from the kind of kingdom the Jews were expecting and rejected the methods on which they relied is known to all men. Why? The answer is found running through the entire gospel record. Jesus rejected their ends and their means because both were in fundamental opposition to the way of life which he had chosen as his own. The supreme end of life is the establishment of the family of God, where every human being will love God as father and all men as brothers. Jesus' kingdom is a universal one and includes all members of the father's family—Romans and Samaritans as well as Jews. Since God is father and all men are brothers and each is of priceless worth, it follows that Christian virtues are family virtues. Attitudes and practices which have no place in the ideal family are wrong for Christians. Jesus has no place for hatred, retaliation and revenge. "Ye have heard that it was said, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, but I say unto you"—something radically different. On the other hand, followers of Jesus are under the positive obligation to treat every person as a member of the father's family.

In response to a question as to which is the greatest commandment, Jesus summarized all the law, the prophets and the gospel in terms of love—the preeminent family virtue—love toward God and toward man. We are to love not only the good and attractive members of the family but also the wicked and the unlovely, including those who are seeking to do us harm or even to destroy us. "Love your enemies (Romans were in the minds of his hearers), do good to them that hate you, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you"—nothing less than this is

the challenge of Jesus. Not only love but forgiveness is demanded. In response to the question of Peter as to whether he should forgive his brother seven times, Jesus replied, "Seventy times seven," that is to say, live always in the forgiving spirit. Love and forgiveness are the means of redeeming the erring one and of restoring him to the family circle. Therefore, the innocent members must love and serve and suffer for the sake of the guilty.

That this is the gospel of Jesus is to be seen not only in his teaching but preeminently in his example. The cross of Calvary is only the natural culmination of Jesus' manner of life. Here we see the innocent loving, serving, suffering, dying for the sake of the guilty. This, says Jesus, is the way every member of the family ought to live. This is the way to restore the broken family bonds: overcome evil by doing good. Thus we see that Jesus was compelled to choose between the patriotic conception of his countrymen and his own way of life. To seek a materialistic and nationalistic kingdom by using the weapons of war and by adopting the attitudes of hate and revenge would have compelled the abandonment of his most essential ideals and practices.

PREEMINENT PATRIOTISM

What then shall we say? Was Jesus a patriot? In the narrow nationalistic and militaristic sense, obviously he was not. But what is real patriotism? Is it not to be defined as love of one's countrymen and devotion to the highest ideals of one's nation? If so, Jesus was the preeminent patriot of his day. No man ever gave such unmistakable evidence of love for his people and no Jew ever rendered such complete devotion to the highest ideals of the prophets as did Jesus. He came that the people might have life and have it to the full. To this end he went about doing good —feeding the hungry, healing the sick, comforting the sorrowing, lifting up the fallen, strengthening the weak, forgiving the sinful, leading to the father all who would follow: loving, serving, suffering, to the end. On the cross of pain and shame he cried aloud: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Not only so, he was completely devoted to the highest ideals of his nation. Did not the prophets rise to the noble conception of Judea as the mediator of justice and righteousness between the nations? Was not the highest conception of the messiah that of a suffering servant? Did any zealot love his countrymen as much as did Jesus, or serve them as well? Who manifested the truest patriotism, Jesus or Barabbas?

In the light of the incontrovertible evidence concerning the

actual choices made by Jesus, what attitude toward patriotism should be maintained by his followers today? Can we not all agree upon the following? First, followers of Jesus are supremely obligated to love their countrymen and to be devoted to the highest ideals of their nation. Patriotism for real Christians is not a matter of lip service but a question of genuine affection for one's people, and wholehearted allegiance to the noblest ideals of one's nation. Too frequently the ideals and symbols of patriotism have been prostituted to unholy ends. Are not the sacred phrases of patriotism bandied about by corrupt politicians and arch-militarists? Is not the flag often used to drape the barroom of some den of vice or to decorate the show window of some profiteer? Shall the true followers of Jesus permit these blatant, self-styled patrioteers, actual enemies of their country, to appropriate the ideals and symbols of patriotism? Surely one of the main tasks before us is to put content into the word patriotism and help our fellow-citizens to understand that it connotes love of people and dedication to ideals. Moreover, it should be emphasized that love of country does not involve hatred of other people. The truest patriotism incorporates within itself the ideal: "Above all nations is humanity."

NO PLACE FOR HATRED

Second, followers of Jesus should realize that the highest service to the citizens and the ideals of their nation can be rendered only by adhering to Jesus' way of life. The truest patriot is the one who most completely incarnates the attitudes and practices of Jesus. There is, therefore, no occasion when a Christian patriot is justified in giving way to hatred of other peoples or to the desire for revenge. "Love your enemies, do good to them that hate you, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you." Since the effective way to overcome evil is by doing good, a Christian patriot should never retaliate with evil for evil, or seek to cast out Satan by using Satan's weapons. In view of the tragic evidence now available which reveals the futility and suicidal nature of modern war, as well as its utterly unchristian character, is it not clear that we, like Jesus, should refuse ever to take up the weapons of war? If we are to overcome national evildoers by non-violent measures, we must create and strengthen international agencies of justice as channels through which good-will may find expression.

Third, the patriot who believes that he can serve his country most effectively by using the weapons of Jesus, must be prepared

to take the consequences of that manner of life. To resist the enemies of one's country with the weapons of war, frequently means the loss of a limb or an eye or even life itself. It is expected of a soldier that he will endure any discomfort or suffering which is necessary in order to win the victory. And so it must be with the Christian who would overcome evil by doing good. To overcome the armed enemies of one's country by depending upon the method of Jesus requires even greater courage, fortitude and endurance than is demanded of a soldier. Jesus recognized this fact and gave full warning to his disciples: "Behold, I send you forth as lambs in the midst of wolves . . . Yea, the hour cometh that whosoever killeth you shall think that he offereth service to God . . .. Except a grain of wheat fall into the earth and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it beareth much fruit . . . If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." The most extreme penalty that the Christian patriot may be called upon to endure is the temporary loss of political freedom rather than use the weapons of hatred and bloodshed. From the whole spirit and example of Jesus, clearly is it far more important that his followers should always live as good members of the father's family, ever maintaining the attitude of love and forgiveness, than that they should preserve political freedom by violating the family spirit. Real freedom is deliverance from attitudes and practices which violate Jesus' way of life. "If therefore the Son shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed." To follow Jesus obligates one to love his countrymen and to seek after the highest ideals of his nation. But to serve as Jesus did may involve humiliation, suffering or death. The real question before us, therefore, is this: Do we have the love, the faith, the courage, the endurance to accept all that is involved in the patriotism of Jesus?

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